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THE HICKORY LIMB

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THE HICKORY LIMB

THE HICKORY LIMB

By

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Illustrations by

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TO MARTHA

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Mother, may I go out to swim?

Yes, my darling daughter;

Hang your clothes on a hickory limb,

And don't go near the water.

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GLADYS BAILEY had a parasol in one hand and a card-case in the other. From her own wide experience in social usage, she was going to initiate the twins into the mystery of formal calls. She had told them earlier in the day that they might bring their younger sister, but later reflection decided her to withdraw this permission. As Katherine and Alice were ready first, it was easy to explain to them her reasons.

“Four,” Gladys said, “are too many to go calling. Margery’s too little for our crowd anyway, and, besides, that would make three from one family. We had just better start before she comes down.”

For a moment the twins looked doubtful; then, as usual, agreed. Thereupon,

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all three cautiously tiptoed off the porch and down the lawn. Before they reached the street, Margery was after them, calling: "Wait a minute, Katherine! Wait, Alice!"

The twins had barely time to slip through the gate and hear Gladys's low injunction, "Don't let her come," when Margery was upon them.

"You can't come with us, Margery," Katherine began, with an assumption of innocence.

"Why, Katherine, you promised I could."

"That was for to-morrow," suggested Alice weakly.

Margery looked from her sisters to Gladys, who was staring vaguely across the street. Her excessive aloofness was suspicious, and Margery instantly jumped to conclusions.

"I bet I know what's the matter. That old Gladys Bailey doesn't want me. But



“ I don't care what she says! I'm going! ”

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I'm going anyhow! I don't care what she says! I'm going!"

And, throwing herself against the gate, Margery pushed and kicked and shook, while Katherine and Alice, holding it shut from the outside, blushed with embarrassment that Gladys should hear, and whispered fiercely, "Margery, keep still!"

But Margery would not keep still. At that moment she was remembering against Gladys many a former indignity. How she hated her—how she had always hated her for her prim, deceitful, grown-up manners, for her patronizing airs, and, most of all, for the strange influence she wielded over Margery's own sisters and brother. It was bad enough that the twins should hang upon her words, but worse, far worse, that even Henry, that model of discretion, should be so completely taken in as to look upon Gladys with an interest which bordered

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dangerously near to admiration. Secure in the esteem of Katherine and Alice, and conscious of her sway over Henry, Gladys saw no reason to conciliate the youngest member of the family. "Margery's too little for our crowd," she would say, and, while Margery fumed and fought, would calmly reiterate the statement until it came to be accepted as fact. Gladys never fought. As on this afternoon, she was always the general, who, so to speak, directed from afar the onslaughts of the actual combatants.

Though outnumbered two to one, Margery had the spirit of a host, and for a while victory hung doubtful. Then fate decided the issue, and, in guise of the maternal voice from the window, called Margery off.

"Margery Blair," the voice commanded, "stop that noise this instant! Aren't you ashamed to tease the girls so? Stop it! Do you hear me?"

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Yes, Margery heard; and, knowing from experience the futility of argument, she stopped.

“Are we ready?” Gladys Bailey asked, suddenly awakening, as it were, from a reverie. The twins, a little heated from their exertions, were quite ready, and, holding their card-cases—envelopes filled with cards of home manufacture—in young-ladyish fashion, they started off, copying, as best they could, the mincing steps of Gladys.

If Margery shouted after them no parting taunt, it was not because she had none ready. The ear corresponding to the maternal voice was probably still at the window; and Margery, though desperate enough for any fate sufficiently tragic, disliked the thought of spending the afternoon in bed. Therefore she kept an outward silence. But her heart would not be still, and every little outraged feeling in her body, finding a

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voice of its own, clamored aloud: "Oh, if we could only pay 'em back! Oh, if we could only pay 'em back!" Margery, alas! had not yet learned that forgiveness is sweeter than revenge. Of course she would forgive them if, say, a milk-wagon should run over her and she had only a few hours to live. Then how they would cry! But as it was too late in the afternoon for any milk-wagons to be about, such a death-bed forgiveness was clearly out of the question. So the one thing left was revenge.

Yet what revenge was possible? None, absolutely none. That afternoon she was utterly powerless to shake by any act of hers the equanimity of those three complacent young persons. There was nothing belonging to them which she could smash, hide, or appropriate. There was nothing they had ever said or done which now, in her hour of need, she could use against them. They were in

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fact so impossibly, so hopelessly—no, not exactly virtuous, but *proper*, that the mere contemplation of their colorless lives threw Margery into a most deplorable state of hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness.

As the hopelessness of revenge settled on Margery's spirit, a feeling of loneliness began to creep over her. She could think of nothing to do, and of nobody to whom she might appeal for sympathy or amusement. The limitless expanse of an idle afternoon stretched out before her like a desert. Henry had gone fishing, and Willie Jones—*Willie Jones!* With that name came a dazzling thought, a plan full-blown, a balm sweet to her soul, a glorious solution!

Margery skipped up to the porch and called out in a coaxing, pleasant tone: "Mamma, may I take a little walk?" The maternal voice, plainly relieved that the storm had spent itself, gave consent,

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and Margery danced out the front gate and up the street, her heart thumping fast in exultation.

O-oh! Let Katherine and Alice distribute as many of their calling-cards as possible, for soon they will have no further use for them. Soon—to be exact, by the time they get home—they will be disgraced, horribly disgraced, and no one will ever care to receive them or their visits again. Even Gladys, their adored Gladys, will give them one cold glance of scorn and turn her back. It was hard, certainly, not to be able to include Gladys in the impending doom. But, after all, Katherine and Alice were the more culpable, for had they not cast aside all feelings of sisterly relationship? Let them, then, bear the brunt of the punishment.

After a fashion Margery was grateful to Gladys, for it was really Gladys who had placed in her hands the weapon she

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was about to use. Gladys was forever saying to Katherine and Alice: "If you're not careful, Margery will disgrace you all some day. Then how will you feel? No one will play with you; no one will even speak to you on the street. And it won't be your fault, either. But, you see, everybody'll know Margery is your sister."

Yes, every one would know, and Margery, as she skipped along, gloated in the thought. It went without saying that, in disgracing the others, Margery was willing to sacrifice herself. Willing? She was almost too willing. In fact, it must be confessed that there was something in the present undertaking which, quite apart from all anticipations of revenge, hummed a gay little tune in her ear, and tempted her hurrying feet into many a frisky little side-step. From time to time she had to nudge herself, as it were, to remember that her purpose

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was one of retributive justice, that the end was what her soul hungered after—not the means.

She gave a passing regret to the afternoon shoes she was wearing, the white stockings, the clean dress, the great pink bow of ribbon in her hair. Likely enough these would be sadly draggled before the deed was done. But even that thought did not check her haste nor cause her for one second to pause or look back.

HER ROAD lay toward the open country. At last, leaving behind all lines of houses, she crawled under a barbed-wire fence into a broad meadow where a few cows were grazing; then over a creek into another meadow, and up to a grassy knoll just ahead. From beyond it faint shouts were coming. At the foot of the knoll Margery rested a few moments, then pushed bravely on to the very gate of her adventure.

From the top of the knoll she looked down the other side to a tiny pond where five little boys were playing and splashing. The minute they spied Margery they sank to their chins in the muddy water and raised frantic hands and voices:

“Go ’way from here! Go ’way from here! We’re swimmin’! We’re swimmin’!”

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With considerable inward trepidation but outward calm, Margery descended toward them.

"We're swimmin'! We're swimmin'!" the little boys kept on shouting inanely until Margery was forced to make some acknowledgment of the information.

"Oh!" she called out in sarcasm undisguised, "I thought you was flying!"

That seemed to make the little boys angry. They redoubled their cries and gesticulations.

"Go 'way from here! Go 'way from here! You're a girl! You're a girl!"

"Is that so? I'm a girl, am I? I'm so glad to hear it!"

Margery sat down near the water's edge and gazed across defiantly at the little boys, who were clustered together at the far end of the pond. They were not her match at sarcasm and so were forced to answer with inarticulate jeers. For a few seconds no more words were



"Dare you to come in swimmin' ! Dare you to come in swimmin' !"

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exchanged. Then one of the boys attempted a parley.

“Margery,” he began. It was Willie Jones. There was a plea and a protest in his voice.

“Well?”

Margery’s sharp interrogation gave so little encouragement that Willie Jones desisted.

Freddy Larkin next essayed the part of spokesman for the boys. Freddy had curly hair and a lisp.

“Mardthery!”

“Well?”

“Dare you to come in thwimmin’!
Dare you to come in thwim——”

Willie Jones choked further utterance with a splash of water. But, though he silenced Freddy, the other three instantly took up the cry, “Dare you to come in swimmin’! Dare you to come in swimmin’!”

Margery’s moment had come.

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“Huh! You think I’m afraid, don’t you? Well, I ain’t!”

She pulled off her shoes, rolled down her white stockings, and then, standing up, very deliberately began unbuttoning the back of her dress.

For the boys this was a turn of events unexpected and most disconcerting. Not for a moment did they really want her to accept their dare. Why, whoever heard of a girl doing such a thing? The very thought scandalized them deeply. Indeed, they would stop her if they could, but it was utterly beyond their powers of expression to tell her that the dare was a mere joke, a pleasantry that had better be forgotten. Unable to explain this, they wriggled about uncomfortably in the water and hid their growing confusion in half-hearted jeers.

When the dress was discarded, every little boy there hoped in his soul that this might be all. The proprieties would not

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be utterly demolished if Margery would only treat as a bathing-suit her skimp little undervest and bloomers. But Margery would not. She calmly proceeded to undo the buttons which made these two garments one.

“Margery!” There was an almost agonized pleading in Willie Jones’s voice.

“Willie Jones, will you shut up! Just because you live near us you needn’t think you’re my brother. ’Cause you ain’t. Besides, girls can do the same as boys.”

There was a last tug; those final garments which might have served as a bathing-suit slipped down over her feet, and Margery stepped forth, a skinny, defiant little Venus, challenging the world to look if it dare. It was a most embarrassing moment for the little boys. Their faces, bobbing about nervously on the surface of the water, blushed violently,

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and their jeers dwindled down to the merest quavers.

Her independence of custom and opinion thus emphatically established, Margery lost no time in entering the water. Sitting gingerly on the muddy bank, she slid forward one foot, then the other. Ugh! The bottom of the pond was soft and slimy, and squashed up between her toes like worms. For the first time a dreadful misgiving came over her. What if, after all, swimming were not the delightful pastime it was cracked up to be! However, there was no turning back now.

Sitting in the water, she propelled herself forward with her hands, slowly and cautiously. The little boys looked on in marked though unexpressed disapproval. Margery was putting them into a horribly awkward position—there was no doubt about that. They didn't like it, either. But in spite of themselves

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they were beginning to feel a certain admiration for her pluck. It was almost a pity she was a girl.

“Look out, Margery!” It was Tommy Grayson who gave the friendly warning. “They’s a tin can over there.”

Margery shifted her direction, and soon reached deeper water, where she was able to stand up without shocking the sensibilities of any one. The little boys were still some distance from her. The water, muddy beyond all chance of transparency, came up to their chests. To them, however, this was not enough. The excessive modesty of eight or nine made them keep even the white of their angular little shoulders primly covered.

Now, human nature can not be expected to retain forever that freshness of surprise which it feels over every new experi-

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ence in life. Time, philosophy tells us, accustoms man to almost anything. It does the same for small boys. Beyond question it was enough to take the wind out of any one to see a girl coolly strip and come in swimming quite as though she were a boy, with all a boy's peculiar rights and privileges. But, astonishing as that might be, it was after all no reason for standing there all day like sticks in the mud when you might just as well be having a good time.

Margery, who was also standing like a stick, felt as bored as they. With nothing to do but gently bounce with the slight lap-lap of the water, she found herself wondering more and more just where the fun of swimming came in.

She watched with envy the small beginnings that betokened in the boys a return to the serious play of life. Charley Burns gave Freddy Larkin an unexpected ducking. Freddy came up splut-

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tering and blowing, but with a handful of slimy mud which he plastered over Charley's white head. Then a splash fight became general. Every one splashed water into every one else's face. Margery noted with interest the peculiar downward stroke of the flat hand which brought about the finest results. She added her shouts to the boys', and longed to add some splashes likewise.

Now, the progress of a splash fight is thus: At first there are no sides—every man's splash is against every man's; but the splashes of all turn immediately against him who shows first signs of defeat; and he, the victim, may then use any means whatever to protect himself.

Eddie Grote was the victim this time. When the deluge became choking, he turned his back, ducked, and then let fly in the general direction of the allied

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forces two slimy handfuls of mud. In the excitement of the game the boys had clean forgot the immodesty of bare shoulders, and had even broken away from their original close grouping until, to all appearances, Margery was one of them. So it happened that, when Freddy Larkin dodged aside, one handful of the watery mud caught Margery square on the head and splattered down over her face and ears.

“Aw, see what you done, Eddie Grote!” Tommy Grayson shouted indignantly. “You went and throwed mud on Margery’s hair ribbon! Ain’t you got no sense?”

In the pause that followed, four little boys reviled the fifth with various forms of, “Aw, what’d you do that for?” And the fifth stood still in awkward consternation, the mud still dripping from his guilty hand.

For a moment Margery, too, was con-

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cerned, but only for a moment. When, under any circumstances, one's world is coming to an end within a few hours at furthest, a hair ribbon more or less matters very little. Moreover, it suddenly flashed upon Margery that here was a chance to make those few remaining hours more golden and at the same time gratify her soul with a trial at that masterly downward stroke of the flat hand. So before Eddie Grote had time to close his astonished mouth, she filled it with a mighty splash of water. Then, while Eddie choked and spluttered, too surprised to defend himself, she sent another well-aimed splash and another, until the gasping Eddie was forced to turn and flee. Not even then did Margery stop, but, following up her advantage, she drove him on and on toward shore.

In their ecstasy at the spectacle, the remaining boys leaped up and down in

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the water like happy little trout, clapping their hands and shouting:

“Hurrah for Margery!”

“Give it to him, Margery!”

“I bet on Margery!”

“What’s the matter with Margery?”

Eddie Grote was in a tight place. All woman’s rights to the contrary, in a struggle of the sexes a man has to show the woman some consideration or fly in the face of public opinion. Eddie Grote, although hard pressed, realized that public opinion would not in this instance stand for what, ordinarily, would be his *modus operandi*, namely, to fling mud over his shoulder. If he could but gain a moment’s time thus, he might make a dash for the deeper water. But he could not, and the other little boys, as they saw his growing predicament, raised shriller, louder shouts of joy:

“That’s right, Margery! Chase him out of the water! Chase him out!”



Eddie Grote was in a tight place.

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“Oh, Eddie Grote, ain’t you ashamed?
And before a girl, too! Oh! Oh! Oh!”

Eddie Grote was ashamed, horribly ashamed. The water was fast falling below his knees. To get back to the depths was impossible; to go straight ahead were greater shame. Facing the inevitable, and clutching frantically at the flying skirts of modesty, he doubled up like a little turtle, chin to knees, and cried quits in those last words of the conquered: “I give up! I give up!”

Margery, who knew the practicee of modern warfare quite as well as he, ceased fire and slowly backed away. She backed amid a chorus that was like a triumphant “See the Conquering Hero Comes.” Freddy Larkin called out, “What’s the matheh with Mardthery?” and the others took up the chant:

She’s all right!

Who’s all right?

MARGERY!

AH, WHAT fun swimming was! Did anything else under heaven equal it? Come, now, what might, she had drunk deep of one of life's joys, and the memory of it would long sustain her. And then, while the boys were still shouting her victory, while her heart was still glowing with the thought of having made good before them, it came—a voice that was like the voice of judgment.

“Margery!” it trumpeted sharply. “*Margery!*”

And at that voice five little Adams were suddenly afraid, and, remembering the nakedness of their shoulders, hid themselves as best they could in the muddy depths, and the solitary little Eve covered herself likewise until the waters were up to her chin. Then six little floating heads turned and gazed in speechless dismay at the knoll. There



“Margery Blair, you come right out of that pond!”



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stood Henry. In one hand he was clutching a tin can full of something; from the other he had dropped a seine.

“Margery!” he repeated as though scarce able to believe his eyes. Then as the vision remained fixed, he changed his tone.

“Margery Blair, you come right out of that pond!”

All the outraged conventionalities of an elder brother sounded in his voice and showed in the horrified expression of his face.

Margery did not question fate, but meekly obeyed. Slowly and reluctantly she made her way to shore. Henry was at the water's edge to hasten her landing. He reached out and dragged her in—no longer a defiant young Venus, but a very frightened little girl whose naughtiness had found her out. Henry pushed her roughly toward her pile of

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clothes with the succinct order, "Now dress." He made a screen of his body between her and the five pairs of eyes that were bobbing about so exasperatingly on the water.

Behind the screen Margery shivered helplessly. "Ain't got nothin' to wipe with," she sniffled.

Very carefully and deliberately, without exposing for an instant the form of his frail sister, Henry deposited on the ground his tin can of minnows, went through all his pockets, and finally pulled out a small, dirty handkerchief. As he handed this over his shoulder, the little boys in the water laughed.

"Say, Henry, will you lend me that towel when Margery's through with it?" asked Charley Burns facetiously.

"I'll punch your head when I ketch you. That's what I'll do to you."

Charley did not continue the subject. Presumably the handkerchief served its

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purpose, for Margery's next words showed that dressing had progressed a bit.

"I can't get my stockin's on," she quavered.

"Pull 'em on," grunted the screen unfeelingly.

A few moments later there was similar trouble with the shoes, and Margery sent out a tearful announcement:

"They just won't go on."

"They got to," remarked the screen firmly.

"But I tell you they won't. They're my new ones and they won't go on without a shoe-horn."

"Stamp on 'em!" commanded Henry gruffly.

Behind the screen convulsive excitement followed, accompanied by a certain Jack-in-the-box effect which seemed highly to amuse the little boys in the water.

"That's right, Margery. Stamp on

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'em!" they repeated derisively until cowed into silence by Henry's stony stare.

"I can't button my dress," was Margery's final plaint.

"You got to."

"But I tell you I can't," she insisted, her voice rising to a long-drawn wail. "It buttons behind."

With the utmost dignity the screen slowly turned itself around. That was a signal for the small boys in the water to break forth into jeers and taunts. They spoke in that treble squeal which little boys use when they seek to imitate girls' voices.

"Say, Henry, please lend me your towel to wipe my ears."

"Button my dress, Henry."

"Where's your shoe-horn, Henry?"

Apparently Henry's calm remained unshaken. In reality he made a rather poor job of the buttoning. As soon as the back of the dress promised to hold

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together, he stopped. Then, firmly clutching Margery's arm in one hand and holding his seine and tin can of minnows in the other, he faced his waspish little tormentors.

THE MOMENT had come for him to speak. He did not hesitate. Had he been forty-five and bald, he could not have met the situation with more determined conventionality. He realized, plainly enough, that the family had been disgraced, and neither to herself nor to the world would he minimize or excuse Margery's culpability. Yet, nevertheless, he would do his best to hush up the scandal.

"See here, you kids," he began warningly. Both hands were occupied, so he could not emphasize his threat with the sight of a clenched fist. His tones, however, carried conviction. "If any of you's blab about this, I'll give you such a smashin'——"

Henry did not finish the sentence. There was no need to finish the sentence. When one's thought has been fully enough expressed, why go on further?

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Henry paused a moment for the meaning to sink in. Then he started up the knoll, dragging Margery after him. Instantly the pond was in an uproar.

"Oh, Henry, can't guess who I seen in swimmin' this afternoon!"

"Comin' back to-morrow, ain't you, Margery?"

"Better slow up, Henry, or you'll drop your minnies."

"Say, Margery, your stockin's is comin' down."

Then Freddy Larkin started to chant at the top of his lungs:

Motheh, may I go out to thwim?

Yeth, my darlin' daughter;

Hang your cloth' . . .

Of course Margery knew that their wit was aimed at Henry, not at her. But she breathed freer, nevertheless, once out of ear-shot.

Henry dragged her homeward at a

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furious pace. He held her arm so tightly that it ached. The worst was that she couldn't make him argue about it. He simply held on without talking.

"You just let my arm go, Henry Blair," she whimpered again and again. "You ain't got any right to hurt me."

But Henry would only close his mouth more grimly and push on.

"Ain't you got any sense, Henry Blair? I ain't tryin' to run off."

She might just as well be talking to a post.

Even the threat, "If you don't let me go, I'll holler," fell on deaf ears.

This was said after they had reached the civilization of streets and houses, where their appearance caused a mild sensation. And small wonder. Margery's stockings were down in rolls about her ankles. Behind, her dress was gaping open where Henry had missed the buttons. In places there were yellow stains where

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the wet of her body had soaked through. Her face was streaked with mud and her hair was drying in a stiff mat that hung down heavily over her eyes. The once gorgeous hair ribbon was little better than a lump of mud.

Several little girls on different porches called out in amazed curiosity, "Why, Margery, what *is* the matter?" and a boy or two, staring hard, remarked, "Hello, Henry. What you doin'?" For all the attention he paid, Henry might not have heard. With lips tightly closed, eyes looking straight ahead, he rushed on, never once relaxing hold of his miserable victim's arm.

At their own gate they met the twins and Gladys Bailey just returning from their round of calls. One look at the strange pair, and even Gladys lost her air of blasé indifference. Her eyes opened wide and she took a deep breath of interest and surprise.

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“Why, Henry,” she said, “what in the world has Margery gone and done now?”

What has Margery gone and done now? If that wasn't like Gladys, before she knew a thing about it to decide that Margery had gone and done something! And when it was Gladys herself who was the cause of it all, anyhow! Remembering this, Margery turned on her and snarled like some angry little animal.

At this fresh token of savagery in his younger sister, Henry's face grew quite apoplectic with shame. But, still keeping his mouth closed, he pushed by Gladys and the twins, and dragged Margery up the steps of the front porch.

“Oh, look at Margery's hair!” Gladys called out in virtuous concern. “What *has* happened? You *must* tell us, Henry!”

Family shame might keep Henry's mouth closed, but Margery felt no such restraint. She wanted Gladys to know! She wanted everybody to know! So

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while Henry was freeing one hand of tin can and seine, preparatory to opening the door, she twisted around until she could shout out the news to the listening world.

“I went in swimmin’!” she cried, shaking her muddied locks at Gladys. “That’s what!” She had to hurry, for Henry was already pulling at the screen door. “With boys, too! With *boys!*”

Henry jerked her roughly into the house, but not before she had heard the beginning of Gladys’s unctuous comment: “Oh, how disgraceful! Ain’t Margery just too awful!” She also had time to realize vaguely that, disgraceful though it was, Gladys seemed in no haste to turn on the twins that cold glance of scorn which, by all reckoning, should instantly have been forthcoming. Why did she stay on talking to them? A cold doubt began to creep into Margery’s mind. Had she, after all, disgraced only

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herself? The doubt slowly grew to a certainty, until, by the time she found herself dragged into the library, she felt as miserable and forlorn as she looked.

Without a word Henry placed her before her mother. Her mother raised languid eyes from a novel; then, like Gladys, showed livelier interest.

“Margery! What have you been doing?”

“Swimmin’.” Henry answered for her, in the first syllables he had uttered since leaving the pond.

“Swimming!” repeated her mother faintly.

“With boys,” added Henry gloomily.

“With boys!” echoed her mother, looking helpless and alarmed. The occasion was evidently one which demanded a well-chosen reproof. She paused a moment, then said impressively: “Why, I never heard of a little girl doing such a thing!”

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At that all Margery's waning spirit flared up. It was what they always said! Whatever she did was bad, not because it *was* bad, but because *she* was a girl!

"'Tain't my fault I'm a girl!" she cried, stamping her foot and glaring out from under her muddy hair, more than ever like a little creature of the woods. "I don't want to be a girl! I want to be a boy, and you know I do!"

"That will do, Margery," said her mother coldly. "You may go to bed now, and when your father comes home, I shall tell him how you've been behaving and he can punish you. Henry, call Effie."

To Effie was intrusted the task of giving Margery a bath and putting her to bed.

"She's been a bad girl this afternoon, Effie, and if she's rude to you, you may spank her." And Margery's mother,

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thus shifting her maternal responsibility, first to a servant, then to her husband, returned to her novel with a troubled sigh.

When one is small and in the grip of adverse circumstances, there is, perhaps, no process of life which can be made more humiliating than a bath. In this instance, suffice to say that Effie was lavish in the use of soap and water, especially soap, and, by the time she finished, had reduced her charge to a state of quiescent misery.

MARGERY'S room was the small front corner room adjoining her mother's. The window was open, and, as she lay in bed, feverish and unhappy, the murmur of conversation from the porch below reached her distinctly. She paid little attention until, hearing Gladys Bailey's voice, it suddenly came over her that that young woman had not yet gone home. Then Margery sat up and listened.

"I just feel so sorry for your poor father," Gladys's voice was saying. "He'll feel so disgraced!" After a slight pause she asked: "Don't you think he'll be home soon?"

So that was it! Gladys lingered on in hopes of witnessing the last scene of Margery's humiliation. Oh, what a deceitful creature Gladys was, pretending that the whole family was so disgraced, yet remaining still as intimate with them

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as ever! How horrid they all were—everybody except, perhaps—perhaps her father! In the past he was the only one who had ever shown himself superior to public opinion and circumstantial evidence. Would he be the same this time? If he, too, were going to be shocked and surprised, Margery felt that there was nothing left for her but to go off somewhere alone and die.

“How many boys did you say they was, Henry?”

Henry evidently had not said, for he did not answer now. Nothing daunted, Gladys went on.

“I suppose they was at least ten. Yes, I’m sure they must ha’ been ten.”

“No, they wasn’t,” Henry blurted out. “They was only five.”

Margery tossed about on her little bed in helpless rage and scorn. Why, the creature was a regular Delilah!

“Who was they, Henry?”

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Again Henry kept silence. But this time Gladys's question was answered in another way. From up the street came the various noises that announce the approach of a crowd of boys.

"Here they come now," Gladys exclaimed in candid satisfaction.

Yes, without doubt they were coming. When they saw Henry they began immediately a taunting sing-song:

"Oh, Henry, can't guess who I seen in swimmin'! Can't guess who I seen in swimmin'!"

Henry dashed off the porch and the chorus scattered in various directions. One saucy voice sang as it ran:

Motheh, may I go out to thwim?

Yeth, my darlin' daughter;

Hang your cloth' . . .

Yes, that was the whole thing in a nutshell, Margery thought. It was exactly how they always talked to girls.

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*Hang your clothes on a hickory limb,
And DON'T go near the water!*

Wasn't it what her mother said to her a dozen times a day? *Now be a good little girl and have a good time.* How could you be a *good* little girl and have a good time at the *same* time? The irony of it, when anybody with a grain of sense would know that the two do not go hand in hand! If she had stayed home that afternoon, she would have been good, but she would not have had a good time. As it was, she had had a good time, but she had not been good. So there you are!

The gate clicked, but it was not Henry, for Gladys offered the conciliatory greeting, "Hello, Willie." So it must be Willie Jones coming through their yard to get to his own. Margery wondered whether Gladys would be able to work him as she had worked Henry. Margery thought not, but if she were—well,

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she, Margery Blair, would have very little more to say to Willie Jones.

When, Margery judged, Willie Jones was passing the porch, Gladys asked in her suavest tones, "Oh, Willie, did you see Margery, too?"

For a moment Willie did not answer, and Margery, kneeling on the floor behind the window curtain, held her breath. Then, apparently without slowing his pace, Willie Jones grunted out in his roughest manner:

"Aw, go on! You don't know what you're talkin' about!"

"Willie Jones is just the rudest boy," Gladys informed the twins. "I wouldn't think your mother would let Margery play with him."

But, up-stairs, Margery wept for joy at this evidence of a true and noble heart.

Henry returned from the chase with the interesting news that he had almost caught Freddy Larkin.

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“Well, I just pity your poor father,” Gladys commented, “if he goes down on the car to-morrow with Freddy Larkin’s father.”

“Why, Gladys?” chorused the twins anxiously.

“Because he’ll laugh at your father and make fun of him for having a girl that went in swimming with boys. Just you see! And your father’ll feel so disgraced!”

Would he really? Margery wondered forlornly. Of all her family, her father was the one, the only one, she would have spared; and now, if Gladys were to be trusted, he it was who would suffer most. With a pang, she suddenly remembered how many times in the past she had been sent to bed, as to-day, to await his coming, and how kind and just he had always been, never pronouncing punishment until he had sifted and weighed the evidence against her. And, remem-

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bering this, her rebellious little heart softened and a sense of regret came over her—the first she had felt that afternoon. Why, why had she not remembered him sooner? How could she *ever* have forgotten him?

In the midst of this incipient remorse, Gladys announced his arrival.

He came in with a cheerful, "Hello, kidlets!" and almost immediately asked, "Where's Margery?"

"Margery's in bed," Henry said significantly.

Margery heard her father pull over a porch chair and seat himself.

"She's been bad," Katherine said.

Still her father made no comment.

It was Alice's turn to speak, and there was nothing left to tell but the deed itself.

"She went in swimmin'," Alice whispered.

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And then, of all things, as Gladys Bailey would say, what did her father do but laugh! He laughed loud and long; but the others, evidently surprised, did not join him.

It was Gladys who spoke first.

"You forgot to tell your father that she went in swimmin' with boys."

"With boys!" her father echoed, and laughed harder than before.

Up-stairs, her head pressed against the window-sill, Margery could scarcely believe her ears. Did he really think it was funny? And then she had it. Her father was pretending! But that, after all, was only half a clew. Why was he pretending? Why?

He stopped laughing after a time and began putting questions to each of them in turn, until he had pieced together the whole story.

"Katherine," he asked finally, "why did you and Alice not take her with you

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when you went calling? If you had, this would not have happened."

"Well, you see, papa," began Katherine, "she's too little for our crowd."

"Too little? What nonsense! She's not a bit too little."

"Well, Gladys says she is," Katherine insisted.

Gladys corrected this statement kindly but firmly: "What I said was, that, for first calls, four was perhaps too big a crowd."

"Oh, I see. That is very different. No doubt Gladys is entirely right. But you've made your first calls now, haven't you?—and hereafter Margery can go with you just as well as not, can't she, Gladys? Why, you know, really, in crowds, the more the merrier. Besides"—and Margery knew just as though she were there the kind of look her father was giving Gladys—"as a favor to me!"

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Gladys was completely taken in.

“I’ll be glad to do anything I can for you, Mr. Blair,” she said politely. Then she added gratuitously: “Everybody ought to be kind to each other.”

“That’s it, exactly. As Gladys says, the big boys and girls should always be kind and gentle to the smaller ones. Now Henry was right, when he found his little sister doing something wrong, to bring her home. But next time he’s going to be more gentle about it, aren’t you, Henry?”

Yes, Henry was, and Margery hugged herself in wonder and amazement. Why, her father was simply workin’ ’em for all they was worth! He was just jollyin’ ’em to beat the band! And it was all for her sake, too! Under the magic of his words, already they were ceasing to regard her as an outcast. And Margery, like many another who has sought to overturn the pillars of society, was

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strangely happy at the thought of being able once again to mingle with her own kind.

“But, papa,” she heard Alice ask, “what’ll you say to Freddy Larkin’s father on the car?”

“What will I say to Freddy Larkin’s father on the car, Alice?”

“Yes, papa, when he—Gladys—she says he’ll make fun of you on account of Margery.”

And then her father rose to the occasion magnificently.

“What will I say,” he repeated in a loud, full voice, “to Freddy Larkin’s father when he makes fun of me for having a little girl who went in swimming with the boys?”

He paused impressively, and suddenly Margery understood. He was the only one of them all who knew that of course she was listening! And he had known it all along and had been sending messages,

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no, not of excuse for her naughtiness—they would have that out together, later—but of love and encouragement for herself. Oh, how she would try never to grieve him again!

“I’ll tell you what I’ll say,” his adorable voice continued. “I’ll say, ‘Well, I just bet you a great big round dollar that Freddy will never see Margery do such a thing again!’ Why, do you know, Gladys, I’d be willing to risk five dollars!”

Then he came into the house and her mother kept him a moment in the library. She could not hear what her mother said, but her father’s answer, “Of course I shall be severe, if necessary,” put a sudden chill on her heart.

Then she heard his foot on the stairs; and she buried her face in the pillow, pretending to be asleep.

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Her father stood over her a moment, looking down at her quietly. She could feel him looking. Then he said, "Margery," softly, gently. It seemed to her that she had never heard her name pronounced so sweetly, so lovingly. Whatever little ice of rebellion had formed anew around her heart melted that instant, and, like a whirlwind, she threw her arms about her father's neck and crushed her chill little nose and her burning face against his cheek. There she sobbed out her love and repentance.

"And papa—papa," she gasped as soon as she could speak, "you can bet him ten dollars if you want to, and you won't lose! I promise you, papa, you won't lose! You *won't!*"

Her mother supposed that, as usual, Margery had cajoled her father into an easy mood, for, when she saw them an hour later, Margery was seated on her

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father's knee, quiet and happy. In all apparent innocence she was saying:

“And oh, papa! Ugh! It just squashes up between your toes like worms!”



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